CAITANYA'S ECSTASIES AND THE THEOLOGY OF THE NAME

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The man on whom this study focuses is usually called Caitanya, but that name has been shortened for convenience. His full monastic designation, conferred upon him by the guru who initiated him into the ascetic life, is *Śrīkṛṣṇa-Caitanya*, "He Who Has Consciousness of Kṛṣṇa." The complete name is worthy of notice because it points toward the most memorable characteristic of the man. Caitanya has a place in history because he was a visionary and a stimulator in others of similar sensitivity.

Caitanya set in motion the first powerful wave of Hindu resurgence of the sixteenth century. His style of worship spread far beyond the circle of his acknowledged disciples and has its echoes throughout the whole of Hindu theism. His direct tradition lives on in a vigorous Caitanyite sect that is actively missionary. Its meetings for emotional singing are held regularly today in about fifty centers in North America.

In addition to its significance in Indian cultural history, the religion of Caitanya has a typological importance. As we describe Caitanya's attitudes and practices, readers may recognize the characteristics of religious movements originating far from the banks of the Ganges. In Caitanya there may be a more thorough development of techniques and a more thoughtful theological explication of the basic experience than can be observed in other manifestations of this type of religion. India is nothing if not systematic in the cultivation and analysis of the varieties of internal religious life.

We approach Caitanya as an exemplar of a type of religion, not as a problem in biography. We shall survey his life only selectively, for materials particularly relevant to the interpretation of his religious experience, limiting ourselves to non-controversial biographical data that need no documentation. We shall take the liberty, from time to time, of amplifying our picture with materials from the

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lives and writings of Caitanya's predecessors and successors when we believe that their outlook was homogeneous with his own. We are not attempting to describe the peculiarly personal religious life of Caitanya, but to delineate his faith as it was shared with, and interpreted by, his tradition.

I

Caitanya was born in 1486 in a brahman family in Bengal. For almost three hundred years Bengal had been under the firm control of Muslims. The aristocracy of the land were Muslims, and prestige and the power of decision lay with Muslims. To the lowest classes of old Bengal the coming of Islam may have been a liberation, but for those who were deeply committed to the Hindu tradition it was a disaster. The upper-class Hindu survived under Muslim rule by the Muslim's unsteady tolerance. So far as he was an idolator, the Hindu in Muslim eyes was a blasphemous person whose customs were rightly subject to stringent repression. The obvious way toward freedom and influence was through conversion to Islam or accommodation to Muslim ways. Those who remained Hindu suffered economic and political handicaps in obtaining the means of cultural self-expression. They were left with few of the freedoms that give meaning and satisfaction to life.

The Hindu establishment's first defense against Muslim pressure was a retreat into a tight orthodox pattern of living, under the direction of brahman priests and scholars. Rituals were elaborated to signalize Hindus' complete loyalty to their indigenous tradition. Less respectable social groups, under the unhappy restraints of the time, found an undeniable remnant of satisfaction in religious exaggeration of sexuality. Caitanya, too, bore the special burdens of his people and period in addition to those common to all humanity; but he was to deal with them in a religious reaction of yet another kind.

Caitanya's childhood home was the town of Navadvīp, a center of the brahmanism just mentioned. It was a university town if we use the phrase loosely: a complex of famous Sanskrit schools was located there. Students came from far and wide to study the scholastic traditions of Hinduism, and especially the relatively secular subjects of logic and grammar. Caitanya's mother was a daughter of a scholar of the place. Caitanya learned Sanskrit in childhood as a matter of course, and became accomplished in grammar especially. In his

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mid-teens he was already a bright young graduate of one of the Sanskrit schools. He founded a school of his own and joined the proud elite of the city.

As an established schoolmaster, Caitanya was pleased with himself and confident of his powers. He was a handsome fellow with an ideal complexion, shoulder-long hair, and a magnetic way. Ambitious and worldly, he had un unashamed interest in getting fees. Along with the rest of the learned community, he was contemptuous of the "vulgar" *bhakti* religion followed by certain of the people of the area. Caitanya belonged to a Vaiṣṇava family, but he brushed aside the efforts of relatives to interest him in serious worship of Viṣṇu in any form. When Īśvara Purī, a monk who was a friend of the family, tried to involve him in a study of Vaiṣṇava scriptures, all Caitanya would do was to pick the passages apart from a literary point of view and ridicule the standard of their grammar.

Yet there was cause for seriousness in the family history of this supercilious young man. He was the ninth or tenth child of his parents, in a house made emptier and emptier by tragedies. The oldest children died in childhood, leaving only Caitanya, his parents, and his older brother. When Caitanya was in his early teens this elder brother abandoned the world as a *sannyāsī* and left home never to be seen again. Then Caitanya's father died. Shortly thereafter his first wife died a sudden accidental death.

As the only surviving son of his father, it fell to Caitanya to perform a traditional ritual for the peace of his soul: in 1508 he was sent to Gayā in Bihar to offer there the *śrāddha* on behalf of his father's spirit. In pursuit of that duty, and with its many sombre associations on his mind, it was necessary for him to enter a shrine displaying footprints in stone that were said to have been left by Viṣṇu when once upon a time he descended to earth to insure the preservation of man. The feet of Viṣṇu are therefore a symbol of the divine presence and help. They have a power of suggestion that a non-Hindu can scarcely imagine. And at that shrine at Gayā Caitanya chanced also to meet again the ascetic Īśvara Purī, who had reminded him once before of the claims of his Vaiṣṇava faith.

Just what happened then in Caitanya's inner self, he was never able to narrate in words. In later life the very mention of the word "Gayā" made him break into tears and lose all power of speech. But it was some kind of mystical vision that burst in upon his consciousness there for the first time. The inenarrable event shaped the

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remainder of his years, and gave a distinctive character to the lives of millions not yet born.

Īśvara Purī communicated to Caitanya a mantra that initiated him into the worship of Kṛṣṇa. He returned to Navadvīp another man. He would talk of nothing but Kṛṣṇa. He paid no attention to his dress and appearance. For his classes in Sanskrit grammar he had no taste now, and no time. His school dissolved. He ignored his scholarly friends, slept on the bare earth, hardly ate, spent his time laughing and weeping and shouting Kṛṣṇa's name. He saw visions of Kṛṣṇa in the clouds and ran after them with his eyes full of tears, crying "O God, do not hide your face from me!" Even his mother thought that he had gone mad.

In the town of Navadvīp there was a circle of Viṣṇu-devotees that was able to appreciate and accept such behavior. Its members were accustomed to assemble nightly in the courtyard of the house of a certain Śrīvās to sing songs in praise of Kṛṣṇa. The orthodox of Navadvīp spoke contemptuously of this group because of the non-intellectual nature of its activities. Even the general public looked down on its members because of the indiscriminate welcome that they gave to persons of mean social status. Caitanya joined them. His capacity for visions, his absolute conviction, his contagious enthusiasm and his talent in speech and song made Caitanya their leader at once. While people outside were still questioning his sanity, the devotees of this circle were beginning to say that he might be Kṛṣṇa himself returning to earth in a new body.

Here in these evening meetings Caitanya developed the methods of chanting and singing that have survived to this day, and cultivated publicly for the first time the possessed states that occur still among his followers and others whom he has influenced. The group's sessions of ecstatic singing—their only form of organized worship—followed the pattern of no established ritual and required the offices of no priest. The formalities of brahmanism were ignored. The requirements of cultivating their distinctive kind of religious feeling shaped the pattern of their religious activities.

The kind of hymn that filled their evenings goes by the general name of *kīrtan*. A *kīrtan* is a congregational song that magnifies a deity by mentioning his honorific names or praiseworthy deeds. Caitanya took the leadership in such singing in the Navadvīp meetings. He is believed by his followers to have been the creator of the several types of kīrtan that have come down to us from his time

and circle. The singing of this group certainly attracted hearers through a fascinating novelty of some kind, but it appears that most of their characteristic types of song had an earlier history. The fresh element seems to have been the use of a special kind of melody, new or revived, that had an unusual appeal. Caitanya's personal contributions included a clear expressive voice of great charm, and, above all, a passionate acceptance of the message of the songs.

The biographers of Caitanya love to dwell on—even to exaggerate—the wild extravagance of Caitanya's behavior as the leading participant in these religious gatherings. The sessions always began with instrumental music of a distinctive character. Then Caitanya would lead off vocally, singing the names of Kṛṣṇa in a fine penetrating voice, uttering each name clearly and with an intensity of feeling that stirred an immediate response in the hearts of the devotees assembled around him. When the emotion in the crowd and in himself reached a certain tension, he would spring up from his seat, raise his arms high and wide and move about amidst the crowd, dancing and singing, shouting the words in ecstasy until perspiration ran down his face and the veins stood out on his brow. Cold thrills surged through his body, the hairs of his head bristled, he trembled and wept. Fits often came on him in which he would stiffen and fall. Then he would sometimes jump up and bound out of the throng and climb a nearby tree—or he would lie for a long time on the ground in a frothing fit, or in exhausted stupefaction, or in a trance. He came out of these lapses of consciousness reluctantly, as if torn away from happy visions.

Soon the fervor that was generated in Caitanya's circle flowed over. Forgetting their former taste for privacy, the devotees took their singing into the streets. A kind of singing procession now developed that is known as *nagarkīrtan*. For the rest of Caitanya's life the world was to know him as a center of commotion in public places, a leader of singing roaring crowds that were set afire by his love of Kṛṣṇa and by his sense of Kṛṣṇa's presence.

The religious tumults that Caitanya now stirred up in Navadvīp did not win immediate admiration from the brahman scholars of the city. They complained to the Muslim governor of the place about the noise in the streets. The governor declared nagarkīrtan a public nuisance and issued an ordinance forbidding any further processions of the kind. According to some of Caitanya's biographers, he re-

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sponded with a modern tactic: he sent more than a dozen nagarkīrtan processions simultaneously through the streets to converge on the governor's palace, and besieged him with such powerful song that even his stout Muslim heart was overcome and he gave Caitanya's people liberty to sing in the streets at will. And that is what Caitanya did, essentially, all the rest of his life.

After a year or so as a lay devotee, Caitanya underwent the rite of *sannyāsa*, gave up his childhood name of Viśvambhara Miśra, and assumed the monastic name by which he is now known. His formal renunciation of the world brought little change in his style of life; it merely symbolized his resolve to dedicate the whole of his time to the worship of Kṛṣṇa. Soon he settled permanently at the great Vaiṣṇava pilgrimage center at Purī on the seacoast of Orissa. Before the millions of pilgrims who came to Purī annually for the Jagannāth car festival, he cut a great figure as leader of the singers and dancers that performed in the processions of the chariots of the gods. He sent certain learned disciples to restore the holy settlements of Mathurā and Vṛndāban and to begin writing the manuals and theological works needed by his movement. His death, which occurred in 1533 at Purī, is the subject of conflicting stories: that he drowned by rushing into the sea in one of his ecstatic visions, or that he died of an infection in a foot that he had injured while dancing in a frenzy. In either case it was his capacity for boundless emotion that brought him death, as it had brought him life.

II

With this simple sketch as biographical background, we can now center in upon our major interest: Caitanya's worship and its special theological supports.

Caitanya held back nothing from the fulfilment of the end of his existence as he understood it, and for him the sole purpose of life was the love and praise of Kṛṣṇa. In the little poem of eight Sanskrit verses called *Śikṣāṣṭakam* that is his only known writing, he expressed his characteristic dedication and his total longing for God:

> When shall my eyes be filled with flooding tears,
> My mouth be choked with stammering praise,
> The hairs of my body thrill with rapture
> At the uttering of Thy Name?

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Let Him crush me in embrace as his beloved
Or by His absence strike me to the quick!
Let the Libertine deal out whate'er He may,
Still He only, no other, is Lord of My Life! [1]

Caitanya never actually repudiated the pious duties that occupy the time of many earnest Hindus. After his death, his learned disciples listed in their scholastic manuals as many as sixty-four devout practices as suitable for observance by members of the sect.[2] Caitanya himself participated only fitfully or casually in such rituals. He threw himself continually into only one defined practice—the worship described in the first verse above—the chanting of the Divine Name.

The early writers on Caitanya's life commonly use the word *saṃkīrtan* in referring to his activities in song. *Saṃkīrtan* or *kīrtan* is a general term for any singing of a god's praises that employs a certain old style of instrumental music and antiphonal exchanges between a chief singer and a chorus. Within this broad heading various sub-classes can be distinguished by names that refer to their content or setting. We have already noticed the word *nagarkīrtan* referring to processional singing in a city (*nagar*). *Līlākīrtan* describes performances that praise Kṛṣṇa by telling of his sportive deeds (*līlās*) in the words of old Vaiṣṇava narrative and lyric poems. *Namkīrtan* is the chanting of stanzas made up largely or entirely of divine names reiterated. *Nāmkīrtan* was Caitanya's characteristic religious practice.

The content and feeling of Caitanya's nāmkīrtan can be illustrated by quoting an example preserved by his earliest biographer.[3] We are

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[1] Nayanaṃ galadambudhārayā
Vadanaṃ gadgadaruddhayā girā
Pulakair nicitam vapuḥ kadā
Tava nāmagrahane bhaviṣyati?
Āśliṣya vā pādaratāṃ pinaṣṭu mām
Adarśanān marmahatāṃ karotu vā.
Yathātathā vā vidadhātu lampaṭo
Matprāṇanāthas tu sa eva nā 'paraḥ!
—Rupa Gosvāmin, ed. Sushil Kumar De, *The Padyāvali* (University of Dacca, 1934), No. 93 p. 39, and No. 337 p. 152.

[2] Sixty-four types of *vaidhi bhakti* are mentioned in Rūpagosvāmin's *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* and are described in great detail in Gopala Bhaṭṭa's *Haribhaktivilāsa*. See S. K. De, *Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta, General Printers and Publishers Limited, 1942), pp. 129, 340-395.

[3] Murāri Gupta, *Śrīkṛṣṇacaitanyacaritāmṛta* 2.2.26 as quoted by Raghava Chaitanya Das, *The Divine Name* (Bombay, the author, 1954), p. 380n., and often by others.

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told that Caitanya, from the time of his conversion onward, frequently sang the following and used it as a basis for sermonic exhortations:

Harer nāma, Harer nāma, Harer nāmaiva kevalam!
Kalau nāstyeva, nāstyeva, nāstyeva gatir anyathā!

Hari's name! Hari's name! Just Hari's name alone!
In the Kali Age there just is not, is not, is not any other way!

In nāmkīrtan such lines are repeated over and over, rhythmically, with intense feeling that begins with deep awareness of the meaning of the divine names that they contain. Another old nāmkīrtan, whose author is said to have been Caitanya himself, has the form of a Sanskrit prayer, as follows:

Rāma Rāghava rakṣa mām
Kṛṣṇa Keśava trāhi mām!

O Rāma the Rāghava protect me,
O Kṛṣṇa of the long locks, take me across!

The lines above are full sentences; but it is not necessary for nāmkīrtan to be grammatically complete or to have a rational meaning. The fact that the names refer to the Deity gives them significance enough. The texts of many kīrtans are no more than a series of names of Viṣṇu, repeated over and over in various orders. A very common nāmkīrtan contains no declarative statement whatever, but only names in the vocative case:

Hare Kṛṣṇa, Hare Kṛṣṇa,
Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa, Hare Hare,
Hare Rāma, Hare Rāma,
Rāma Rāma, Hare Hare!

In the singing of verses like these, each line, separately, is incanted by the leader first, and the whole assembly repeats each line after him, one by one. As the verse is gone through again and again, the leader steps up the tempo. When the speed of utterance approaches the utmost possible, the whole group, in unison, begins to shout the lines, at the same time beating out the rhythm with sharply-timed clapping of hands. The singers begin to sway and to let themselves go in ungoverned gestures. Faces flush. From the line of instrumental accompanists the bell-like peal of small brass cymbals swells up with the rising shouting and pierces through it. The whole process approaches a crashing, breath-taking crescendo. The point

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of explosion is reached: eyes flash, mouths drop open, a tremor runs through the entire assembly. The Power, the Presence, has been felt!

At such times, they say, Caitanya used to dance in ecstasy with all consciousness of his body gone.[4] His principal Bengali biography reports how he used to behave in Purī at the height of his participation in nagarkīrtan around the car of Jagannāth:

> In the midst of the wild dance a strange delirium came upon the master. At the same moment all eight kinds of *sāttvik* emotion were stirred up within him. His hair stood on end, with flesh and skin all bristly like a *śimul* tree full of thorns . . . From his whole body ran sweat mixed with blood, while with choked voice he stammered incoherently. His tears fell like water from a fountain . . . At one moment he seemed stupefied, the next he rolled on the ground; now his hands and feet were motionless like dried sticks, again he lay prone on the ground almost bereft of breath . . . At times water fell from his eyes and nose, and froth from his mouth.[5]

We have in literature an illuminating account of similar emotional phenomena that occurred at a kīrtan festival held under the patronage of the Rājā of Kheturi in the first decade of the 17th century. Of one of the participants named Narottama, we read that "mystic visions came to Narottama often during this concert of music, and he was so overpowered by them that at one time he swooned away. For some time the songs had to be stopped and all were busy trying to restore him to his senses, and when this was done, he looked divinely inspired as though just returned from the presence of God." [6] To express their appreciation of the meaning of such experiences some of the

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[4] A. A. Bake, "Çri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu," Koninklijke Nederlandsche Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afd. Letterkunde, *Mededelingen*, Nieuwe Reeks, Deel 11, No. 8, pp. 279-305, reprinted by Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij, Amsterdam, 1948, p. 9/287. Though the Caitanya sect worships Kṛṣṇa as God in his highest nature, notice that the names of Rāma are acceptable divine names, as referring to an incarnation of Kṛṣṇa and thus to the same godhead. To magnify Rāma is not to lessen Kṛṣṇa but to recall the breadth of his protective operations. It is noteworthy that *mukti*, the most persistent longing of the Hindu soul, is also in evidence here. Though Caitanyite writers often belittle *mukti* as an object of aspiration, the singers here cry out, "Trāhi mām, take me over (this stream *saṃsāra*, the world)." In Bengal, land of rivers, God is a ferryman and worshippers pray, "Take me to the Other Shore."

[5] Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja, *Caitanyacaritāmṛta* II.13, translated by Melville T. Kennedy in his *The Chaitanya Movement* (Calcutta, Association Press, 1925), p. 44.

[6] D. C. Sen, *The Vaishnava Literature of Medieval Bengal* (University of Calcutta, 1917), p. 130.

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participants used the language of erotic love. A singer named Gokul Dās sang this verse:

> O Lucky night that I spent,
> I beheld the moonlike face of my love!
> My youth, my life became blessed
> And everything around assumed an air of joy.
> My home has become a true home today,
> And my body a worthy one indeed.
> Providence has favored me tonight
> And all my doubts are removed.[7]

Providence has favored me, I beheld the face of my Love, my doubts are removed—these words bespeak a decisive divine self-disclosure. The poet means to say: God was present, I have met Him. My life has come to fruition; before I wondered, now I know.

Kīrtan is able to bring to many people an effective certitude regarding God's existence and power. Their faith arises with, and out of, certain extraordinary internal sensations and bodily phenomena. The tingling of the flesh that arises in the singer is understood to be no mere physical titilation but a response to a genuine dynamic Presence. He is sure that he is indwelt by, and communes with, God himself. Caitanya believed that he had been blest by such realization, and his contemporaries affirmed his belief in the very name that they gave him.

Writers belonging to this bhakti tradition support their belief in the supernatural nature of kīrtan by asserting that miraculous benefits come from the practice. Unlike ordinary Hindu rites, the chanting of the Name does not depend for its effectiveness upon performance in any particular time or place or state of purity.[8] It causes power to flow in from an omnipotent source and sweep away forever old weaknesses, blemishes and oppressions. The Name confers unflinching love of Kṛṣṇa and turns one's entire life to devotion.[9] Writers cite the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* to affirm the superiority of the cleansing power of the Name in comparison with the entire register of Hindu rituals of purification, which can indeed remove the consequence of individual offenses, but leave the root of sin untouched, whereas the Name removes the very source of pollution

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[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Raghava Chaitanya Das, *op. cit.*, p. 370, quoting Gopāla Bhaṭṭa, *Haribhaktivilāsa* 2.11.411, *na deśakālaniyamo na śaucāśaucanirṇayaḥ. . .*

[9] Das, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

by regenerating the mind.[10] Hanumanprasad Poddar, modern writer and devotee, says that the temptations to evil living that once were all but irresistible become through this practice easy to withstand, and that the Name burns up old sins as fire consumes piled hay. The roaring sound of the Name goes out and purges away the sins of all who hear—even those of the birds and beasts. People who have transgressed all the laws of morality and religion can nevertheless obtain salvation through the uttering of Hari's Name.[11] It would seem that the Name can do whatever God himself can do! Advocates say that the religion of chanting the Name is now the world's only effective religion. In proof of their claim they quote *Bhāgavata purāṇa* 12.3.52:

> What was obtained in the Kṛta Age by meditation on Viṣṇu,
> In the Tretā Age by sacrificing with oblations,
> In the Dvāpara Age by image worship,
> In the Kali Age comes by *kīrtan* of Hari.[12]

The position of the faith as the one universal religion for today is supported further by pointing out its universal accessibility, in that "everyone irrespective of caste, colour, creed, community, sex, age, space or time is allowed to enter or join." [13]

The followers of Caitanya are not awed even by the prestige of Śaṅkara's *advaita*. Quoting the *Caitanyacaritāmṛta* they say that the bliss that comes of chanting the name of Kṛṣṇa makes insignificant in comparison the bliss that the *jñānī* feels in experiencing the Undifferentiated *Brahman* and merging into it: the Name is a surging ocean of joy that makes the monists' *samādhi* look like the puddle of water that gathers in the hoofprint of a cow.[14] In India, that is strong language. It cannot means less than this: that many who have followed this pathway of religion have undergone an experience in which their gravest anxieties dissolve. They attain a sense of puri-

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[10] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 6.2.7-12, vol. I p. 716 in edition of V. Ramaswamy Sastrulu and Sons, Madras, 1937. On the power of the Name in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and other writings, see also Adalbert Gail, *Bhakti im Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, Münchener Indologische Studien, Band 6, 1969), pp. 77f., 95f.

[11] Hanumanprasad Poddar, *The Divine Name and Its Practice* (Gorakhpur, Gita Press, n.d.), pp. 7, 14, 84.

[12] Kṛte yad dhyāyato Viṣṇum, tretāyām yajato makhaiḥ,
Dvāpare paricaryāyām, kalau taddharikīrtanāt.

[13] Bhakti Pradip Tirtha, *Sayings of Vaishnava Saints* (Puri, A. R. Patnaik, 1949), p. 11.

[14] Raghava Chaitanya Das, *op. cit.*, p. 218, quoting Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja, *Caitanyacaritāmṛta*, 7.96-98.

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fication, relief, victory and release. They have utmost confidence in the reality of the transformation they have undergone. For them, further search is needless—is out of the question!

The outsider's problem of understanding is not a difficulty in believing that the experiences described by the devotees actually occur. The accounts of the Hindu writers are consistent. The emotional phenomena described have been experienced in some degree by many non-Hindus, and many who have not known them personally, accept their actuality on the testimony of acquaintances whose veracity they trust. The uncanny moving power within is a ubiquitous factor in religious psychology. We have no reason to suppose that these particular reports are fictions. The difficulty lies, rather, in appreciating the expansive construction that is placed on these internal experiences. How is the *bhakta* able to be confident that these events are revelatory, ultimate in knowledge, saving, the very action of God?

The ability of a religious tradition to convince and reassure depends not only on its success in producing its characteristic experience, but also on its ability to surround the experience with effective theological explication. Ecstatic religious movements like that of Caitanya are often disappointingly inarticulate in their theology. But Hindus in general attach great importance to subjective states and give thoughtful attention to their analysis and interpretation. From ecstatics who are Hindu we dare therefore to expect explanatory ideas of some kind. In particular, a tradition as lasting as Caitanya's is likely to have had something beyond dogmatic identifications to offer the minds of its adherents. I am not aware that anyone has searched seriously, however, for Caitanyite theological teachings on kīrtan. The special undertaking of this study was to gather together any easily-available Vaiṣṇava doctrines that may have been intended to explain the experiences of these kīrtan-singers. The materials found are enough to justify a rudimentary account of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism's thinking about the Names of God. The Caitanyite theology of the Name is not elaborate. But well-developed theories about this deep-felt matter of the names of God are not easy to find anywhere. In comparison with the reflections of other groups, the Caitanyites' theological effort in this connection may even be sophisticated. It is not the whole of Caitanyite theology, of course, anymore than kīrtan is the whole of Caitanyite religious practice. The ecstatic trances of Caitanya himself were often precipitated by other means,

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especially by his contemplation of the forms of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa as physical idols or as merely mental images. For the later Caitanyite movement also, the contemplation of the erotic sports of this Divine Pair has remained a vital second focus of meditation, vision, and theological interpretation. The singing of kīrtan is the more easily available and popular practice, however, and its conceptual framework is important.

The fundamental Vaiṣṇava idea about the Name is suggested in an often-quoted Sanskrit verse in which Kṛṣṇa promises that he will himself be present in the singing of kīrtan.

Nāham vasāmi Vaikuṇṭhe
na yogihṛdaye ravau.
Madbhaktā yatra gāyanti
tatra tiṣṭhāmi Nārada.[15]

I dwell not in Vaikuṇṭha
nor in the hearts of yogis, nor in the sun;
Where my devotees are singing,
there, O Nārada, stand I!

Now, "in the hearts of yogis" is exactly the place where many Hindus would deem God most likely to be present. Not so these bhaktas. Their method is not isolation, introspection, and arduous self-effort. Their trust is in the grace of God.[16] The background of their trust is two thousand years of Vaiṣṇava teaching about the willingness of God to intervene and assist man in the realization of his highest end. This confidence appears as early as the *Bhagavadgītā*, in which Kṛṣṇa says (4.7) that he descends to earth in age after age to destroy evil and establish true religion. In *Bhagavadgītā* 18:66 Kṛṣṇa promises salvation even to great sinners if they come to him in complete trust. The Vaiṣṇava God is a God who can be expected to be available to his worshippers' need.

How is God's presence in the circle of the singers actualized and

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[15] Bake, *op. cit.*, p. 7/285.

[16] Another striking expression of this Caitanyite depreciation of yoga is found in Priyā Dās' commentary on Nābhādās' *Bhaktamāl* (Bombay, Śrīveṅkateśvara Steam Press, *saṃvat* 1888), p. 238:

Prem bhakti ekau palak, koṭi varaṣko yog,
Prem bhakti sab yog hai, yog prem bina rog!
Loving devotion for one moment
equals yoga for ten million years
Loving devotion's the whole of yoga,
yoga without love's a disease!

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certified? In the line of those Vaiṣṇavas who use the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, there is a special understanding that the instrument through which the Divine Presence is mediated is the sung Name itself. The chanting of the names of God is a human activity, admittedly; but it is an occasion for a superhuman activity—the descent of God into the presence of His devotees. The voicing of a divine name brings realization of God's presence because a name of God is not just a sound, referring to a reality that is something other than itself. In the common fund of Hindu thought, a metaphysical status and function pertains to a thing's name. A name, in comparison with a thing's phenomenal aspect, is the principle of its individuality real or imagined—a subtler level of its reality and an approach to the essence of the thing named. In an advaita system that finally denies the truth of all individualizations, a divine name cannot express highest Divinity, or offer an approach to the Divine Being that is more than preliminary in function.[17] But for bhaktas like the Caitanyites and perhaps others,[18] who accept individualizations as real and acknowledge real personality in men and in God, a true name of God is a genuine modality of God's being or is God himself. That is why, in the reciting of sacred names, the mysterious Presence is often felt: God is there.

Even within the Caitanyite tradition, there is divergence in the way in which the relation between God and the Name is understood. Sometimes the divine names are described as outflows of the power of God. This seems to have been the view of Caitanya himself, as we see it in the second verse of his *Śikṣāṣṭakam*:

> Thou possessest name upon name, in multitude.
> In each of them is fixed Thy power entire,
> Bound by no rule of time of recitation.[19]

By the end of the sixteenth century the theologians of Caitanya's movement developed a stronger claim than this. They dared to say, not merely that the *Power* of God is present in such recitation, but that, when the Name is uttered in faith, God *Himself* is present. The

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[17] For *advaita* views of *nāma* see *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6:1.4-6, 6:4.1-4, and S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* I (London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd.), 1923ff, p. 188n.

[18] See W. H. McLeod, *Gurū Nānak and the Sikh Religion* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 189-196.

[19] Nāmnāmakāri bahudhā nijasarvaśaktis
Tatrārpitā niyamitaḥ smaraṇe na kālaḥ.
—Rupa Gosvāmin, ed. Sushil Kumar De, *op. cit.*, No. 31, p. 13.

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Vṛndāban Gosvāmins call this belief the doctrine of *Nāmanāminoradvaita* or *Nāmanāminorabheda*, "the non-difference between the Named One and the Name." [20] Jīva Gosvāmin in his *Bhagavat-Saṃdarbha* states the main point bluntly: *bhagavat-svarūpam eva nāma*, "The Name is the very essence of the Lord." [21]

The doctors of the sect warn, however, that one must not expect the Divine Presence to be realized through uttering any and every name of God that human fancy can concoct. Names that are products of the imagination of man are insubstantial and of no effect. Jīva Gosvāmin says again in the book just mentioned, ". . . it is by the use of names that are celebrated in *scripture* that the Lord himself is instantly known . . . The inherent effectiveness of these must be recognized, and the fictitious nature of the others." [22] Modern Caitanyites stress the fact that kīrtan, as they practice it, uses no names save those that occur in sacred texts. As words of revelation, such names are transcendental (*aprākṛita*) in nature, and utterly different from the merely aural names that are constantly being created by speculative minds. Scriptural names, when sung with faith, bring the full being and power of God into immediate presence.[23] They are the end, as well as the means, of the religious life.

This conception of the Name as a descending and saving agency is similar in some ways to the ancient Vaiṣṇava idea of an *avatāra*. The kinship of conceptions was recognized by the Caitanyite theologians. At several points in the evolution of the sectarian thought they considered including the Name under this old and honored heading. It was possible, first, to see the Name—a heavenly reality that has "descended" and assumed a form available to the senses—as itself a type of avatāra. Jīva Gosvāmin in one passage actualizes this possibility by remarking about the Name, "Speaking of *avatāras*, this is an *avatāra* of the Lord in the form of syllables: "*varṇarūpenāvatāro 'yam.*" [24]

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[20] S. K. De, "Philosophy of Bengal Vaiṣṇavism" in his *Bengal's Contribution to Sanskrit Literature and Studies in Bengal Vaisnavism* (Calcutta, Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyaya, 1960), p. 120.

[21] Quoted by De, *Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta, General Printers and Publishers, 1942), p. 219 n. 9.

[22] Ato yaiḥ śāstre'ti-prasiddhair nāmabhiḥ śrī-bhagavān eva jaṭiti pratīto bhavati. . . teṣām svataḥ-siddhatvam anyeṣam kalpanāmayatvaṃ jñeyam. (Quoted in De, *Vaiṣṇava Faith*, p. 220).

[23] Nisikanta Sannyal, *Sree Krishna Chaitanya* (Madras, Gaudiya Math, 1933), pp. 576, 601f.

[24] *Avatārāntaravat parameśvarasya varṇarūpeṇāvatāro'yam*, quoted by De, *Vaiṣṇava Faith*, p. 220.

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A second adaptation to incarnational thinking lay in the possibility of seeing the Name as the means whereby possessed individuals become avatāras "by adoption," so to speak. This type of reasoning took the form of an early effort to connect the Name with the sect's well-established *āveśa* class of avatāra. An *āveśāvatāra* is a Divine Incarnation who is made such by the fact that the Lord enters into that individual and possesses him. The category covered a class of saints who were preeminent by reason of extraordinary charisma. The supernormal qualities of ecstatic devotees could easily be said to come about through the agency of the Name, and the view that Caitanya became an *āveśa* or "possessed" avatāra through his singing of kīrtan was plausible and had some explanatory value. We are not surprised, therefore to find that Caitanya was called an *āveśāvatāra* at a very early time by his biographer Murāri Gupta.[25]

But in the end the concept of avatāra did not satisfy. An avatāra of any kind is not quite the full cosmic Being of God. An *āveśāvatāra* in particular is not the infinite Lord. Rūpa Gosvāmin says that *āveśāvatāras* arise when the Lord enters into and exalts particular souls, but they are avatāras by analogy only, not equatable with real avatāras because they are limited in duration and limited in degree of immanence of the divine power.[26] Jīva Gosvāmin says in similar vein that *āveśāvatāras* possess a great portion of the divine energy but are never representative of the fullness of the Deity.[27]

The Bengal Vaiṣṇavas quickly dropped these early attempts to understand the Name as a *varṇāvatāra*, or as the source of *āveśāvatāras*. Apparently they could risk no impairment of their trust that the Name on the lips of devotees brings contact with Highest Godhead.[28] If an *āveśāvatāra* is not an eternal and full manifestation of the Deity, then the completeness and finality of any process that brings such avatāras into being is lost also. Perhaps it was for this reason that the Bengal Vaiṣṇavas rejected for their founder the label of *āveśāvatāra*, with its flaw of incompleteness, and identified Caitanya, as a matter of fact, with Kṛṣṇa Himself. With regard to the nature of the Name, no doctrine would do that claimed less than *bhagavat-svarūpam eva nāma*, "The Name is the very essence of the Lord." Once that truth

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[25] De, *Vaiṣṇava Faith*, pp. 338, 175.

[26] De, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

[27] De, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

[28] For an emphatic modern defense of the unqualified divinity of the Name see Raghava Chaitanya Das, *op. cit.*, pp. 582-592; also Sannyal, *op. cit.*, pp. 638-40.

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is established beyond doubt, any believer who "knows the Name"—who hears and sings and feels it—is assured that he has arrived at Truth, the ultimate solution, the chief end of man. In singing the Name in the company of the saints, his doubts flee away, divine power rises up within him, the impossible becomes possible, the burden of the past is lifted from him, he has accomplished the purpose of his life, and he can look with composure upon death itself.

Because it is the Name that is to be known, the Bengal Vaiṣṇava's call to the religious life is not a call to the lonely hermitage, but an invitation to a community of song. The significance of such singing for believers oppressed by the frustrations of mortality is apparent in a kīrtan collected by Professor Bake, that was written as recently as 1943:

> Dance, O Mind
> and spread your arms
> and sing the name of God;
> sing Hari once.
>
> The birds and beasts wake up and sing
> once ev'ry watch;
> how then should you, created human,
> yet still remain unconscious? . . .
>
> If you neglect the Name
> stark danger looms
> when the great Crossing comes
> and you stand all alone.
>
> Remember well the Name
> and dance and spread your arms!
> Sing Hari,
> Oh, sing Hari! [29]

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[29] Bake, *op. cit.*, pp. 7f.

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